

NEW YORK TIMES

28 July 1983

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-9

House Opens Debate on Covert Latin Efforts

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, July 27 — Congressional leaders today predicted a close vote as the House of Representatives began debate on a proposal to cut off secret aid to Nicaraguan insurgents.

Larry Speakes, the White House spokesman, agreed with that assessment and said: "It is a very difficult vote for us. I cannot predict victory."

Even if the House cuts off aid, the outcome is unclear in the Republican-controlled Senate. But the House vote, which will probably be taken Thursday,

will provide a test of Congressional support for the Administration's policy.

Lawmakers in both parties seem divided and confused by these policies. But they are also dissatisfied with the alternatives and uncertain over which direction to take.

"They are torn," said Representative Jim Wright of Texas, the majority leader. "They are thoroughly disillusioned with the Nicaraguan Government and believe them to be a committed Marxist group with territorial ambitions. But the majority is also disillusioned with the way we are going about altering their behavior."

President Reagan, who defended his policies at a news conference on Tuesday, dispatched Secretary of State George P. Shultz and William P. Clark, the national security adviser, to Capitol Hill for a private session with interested senators. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Democrat of New York, said rising concern could be measured by the attendance at the briefing, "the largest we have ever had up here."

Senator Moynihan said that, while Mr. Shultz "did a masterful job" at the briefing, he did not dispel the "very deep suspicion" harbored by many senators on the Central American issue.

The Senator said military advisers to the President had expressed reservations about American involvement.

"The Government does not have a policy," Senator Moynihan said. "The Government is deeply divided."

Republican Senators seemed more sympathetic, and Senator John H. Chafee of Rhode Island, ranking Republican on the Intelligence Committee, said of the Administration, "I think they are basically on the right track."

"What counts around here," Senator Chafee added, "is not necessarily what is said but who said it. And there is a feeling of confidence in George Shultz."

In the House, Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. was critical of President Reagan's news conference performance on Tuesday, calling him inept.

"There was a general feeling on the floor of the House last night that the President did not do a good job," Mr. O'Neill said, adding "I think the ineptness of the manner in which he answered questions will help" advocates of an aid cutoff.

As it came to the House floor today, the legislation on Nicaragua would bar the United States from continuing its covert aid to rebels who have been battling the Government from bases in Honduras and Costa Rica. It would also authorize the expenditure of \$80 million in overt aid for the purpose of blocking arms traffic in the region.

Secret aid has been flowing from the Central Intelligence Agency to Nicaraguan rebels since December 1981 with the consent of Congressional intelligence committees. In August 1982, Congress decreed that the aid should be limited to helping stop the flow of arms from Nicaragua to the Salvadoran rebels.

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